

**LEJZOR AND FISZEL SING THE BLUES**

**CHESS RECORDS and the  
BLACK-JEWISH ALLIANCE**



**E. MICHAEL JONES**

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Cover: Leonard, Marshall, and Phil Chess (l to r) at Chess Records in 1969

*To Gloria Hardy*

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## Preface

Hollywood has a way of turning history upside down. Hollywood directors are often in a position of not knowing what their own movies mean. The classic instance is horror movies. Martin Scorsese made the point in a conversation with David Cronenberg, when he told him that *Rabid* was a great film, but that Cronenberg didn't understand it.

The same is true in general of the Hollywood genre known as the biopic and in particular of the biopic of the Chess brothers, *Cadillac Records*. It is difficult to imagine a topic more likely to generate animosity between Blacks and Jews than the sordid story of two Polish Jews ripping off the royalties of illiterate blues singers from Mississippi, which is what *Cadillac Records* portrays; and yet here we have Hollywood doing a movie on one of the most sordid chapters of the 60 year revolutionary movement known as the Black-Jewish Alliance.

Murray Friedman, who used to be head of the American Jewish Committee in Philadelphia, once wrote a book about the Black-Jewish Alliance called *What Went Wrong?*

*Lejzor and Fiszal Sing the Blues* answers that question in minute if depressing detail.

E. Michael Jones

South Bend, Indiana

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## Cadillac Records

As some indication that the black-Jewish alliance was a hot topic in the wake of Barack Obama's election in 2008 as president of the United States, Sony released the movie *Cadillac Records*, its homage to one of the most fertile periods of collaboration between blacks and Jews, the '50s and '60s. *Cadillac Records* celebrates one of the most significant areas of their cultural collaboration as well, namely, "race music," later renamed rock 'n roll.

Obama mentioned the influence which the black-Jewish alliance had had on his life in a speech he gave at the AIPAC convention during the summer of the 2008 election campaign. Obama was, in more ways than he would like to enumerate in public, a product of that alliance, but in hinting at that fact he was also less than honest about the particular terms of engagement it stipulated and the causes of its eventual demise. In this regard, Barack Obama has a lot in common with *Cadillac Records*, the biopic celebrating the lives of an unlikely ménage of Polish Jews and Mississippi sharecroppers and the music they produced. It is difficult to imagine something less capable of arousing fraternal feelings among either blacks or Jews than the saga of Chess records in Chicago and the tales of cheating, drug abuse, and sexual degeneracy that went along with it, but the *Zeitgeist*, both then and now, has a logic all its own, and it is one which Hollywood has shown itself determined to follow.

At some time during the 1930s, on one of his Library of Congress-sponsored ethnic music collecting expeditions through the South, Alan Lomax popped open the trunk of his car and recorded the singing of a Mississippi Delta cotton picker by the name of McKinley Morganfield. The moment gets captured in *Cadillac Records*, which documents in its revisionist and sanitized way one of the most significant chapters in the volume of American history known as the black-Jewish alliance. By 1943 McKinley Morganfield had had enough of chopping cotton and decided to join what would become the greatest internal migration in American history when he got on an Illinois Central train and moved to Chicago, where he changed his occupation to blues singer and his name to Muddy Waters.

The change in locale necessitated a change in the music. Robert Johnson-style blues played on an acoustic guitar was no match for the noise of a city

like Chicago, so Muddy Waters got himself an electric guitar. *Cadillac Records* has him busking on the streets of Chicago with his electric guitar but offers no explanation of who was providing the electricity.

In an April 1948 session, Muddy Waters recorded two electrified songs: "I can't be satisfied" and "I feel like going home." Both were anthems of black migration, and both records addressed the mind of the black migrants, who were torn between nostalgia for the simpler life they had left behind in Mississippi and the largely sexual attractions of emancipation from both segregation and the moral law which big northern cities like Chicago provided.

If demography is destiny, Muddy Waters was destined to become a star because by 1948 Chicago was home to 500,000 refugees from the Mississippi delta who had a set of musical tastes and longings that had been created in the cotton fields and weren't going to be satisfied, now that they were in Chicago, by the crooning of people like Bing Crosby.

Muddy Waters didn't write his own material. The uncrowned poet laureate of the black migration to Chicago was a fellow Mississippian by the name of Willie Dixon, who articulated the longings of the former sharecroppers by telling them that he was their "Hoochie Coochie Man." Since moving to Chicago seemed like dying and going to heaven, at least on Saturday night, Dixon explained their good fortune by claiming there was a special juju attached to the train ride up from Mississippi. With Muddy Waters as his front man, Dixon was telling them that "on the seventh hour, on the seventh day on the seventh month the seven doctors say" that all of the Hoochie Coochie men in Chicago had been "born for good luck ... ." If for no one else, the song proved to be good juju for Muddy Waters. "He was doing that song until the day he died," Dixon said later. "I'm Your Hoochie Coochie Man" was a song that Muddy Waters could sing with conviction, and when he did, the Negroes on the South Side of Chicago believed every word he said and bought his records. Muddy Waters was what the next generation would call a role model for the Negro migrant, and they listened to what he said and acted accordingly. The results were disastrous for the black family, something which gets noted almost as an aside in *Cadillac Records*, and less than salubrious for everyone else, something which does not get noted at all. Muddy Waters dealt with the *sequelae* of his liberated passions in a way that suited his new abode and the lifestyle which went with it: he hired a Jewish lawyer to defend him against the many paternity suits which got filed against



him. He never lost a case, but failed to realize that all of those legal fees were coming off the top of his royalties. Muddy Waters got his Mojo workin in Chicago, but he never learned how to read; in terms of writing, he mastered two words "McKinley" and "Morganfield," which he signed to a number of recording contracts, whose details remained opaque to him until the 1970s when other lawyers explained to him how he had been cheated out of his royalties.

The men who cheated this and other largely illiterate bluesmen from Mississippi were two Polish Jews by the name of Leonard and Phil Chess. Lejzor Czyz (born in 1917) and his younger brother Fiszel (born 1921) arrived in Chicago in 1928 along with their sister Malka and their parents Yasef and Cyrila. The Czyz family had emigrated from Motele, the Polish *shtetl* which had produced Chaim Weitzman, Israel's first president. After arriving at Ellis Island, the Czyz family made its way to Chicago, where Yasef tried to find work as a shoemaker and where his son, who Anglicized his name to Leonard Chess, struggled to learn English and make a living as a "restless and unhappy"<sup>[1]</sup> junk dealer.

In 1946 Leonard Chess bought a small restaurant located at 3905 South Cottage Grove, in what was then the heart of Bronzeville, the Negro Tenderloin district, and renamed it the Macomba Lounge. Nadine Cohodas tells us that Cottage Grove Street "had become a magnet for black Chicagoans looking for spirited night-life. Music, prostitution, drugs-all were easily available. ... It was a world of pimps, hookers, maids, chauffeurs, good-time whites, factory workers, white collar workers, musicians, entertainers, bartenders, waiters."

Moral corruption, in other words, was part of the migration experience. Cohodas claims that "Prostitution was so common that Phil candidly described the neighborhood as home to 'pimps and whores.'"<sup>[2]</sup> She then tries to finesse the question of the Chess brothers' involvement in all this vice. "Prostitution was a financial boon to the club," and "There was nothin' but dope in the place," according to one of the musicians who played there, but "Nobody thought that Leonard was involved in drug dealing," even though "it would be bad for business to crack down, not to mention futile."<sup>[3]</sup>

Were Jews like Leonard Chess responsible for the moral corruption of the Negro migrants to Chicago? The question seems odd because the blues and sexual immorality have by now become synonymous. At a time when between 70 and 80 percent of all black babies are born out of wedlock, sexual

immorality has come to be seen as a constituent element of what it means to be black, and so no one gets around to asking questions about how this situation came about. Racism surely plays a role in all of these assumptions, but since sexual deviance has become the norm in America, no one gets upset by such claims anymore, not as upset anyway as by claims that blacks are genetically inferior to whites when it comes to intelligence. The solution to the problem of sexual deviance has been to redefine it out of existence. Race music is one of the cultural devices which have made that redefinition plausible to large numbers of people. The cliché of the oversexed bluesman, however, obscures the moral corruption that often overwhelmed the families of black migrants up from the South when they arrived in Chicago. The fact that so many whites followed their example, largely because of the widespread effect that the dissemination of "race music" exerted during this period doesn't change the fact that the moral law is written on the hearts of all men, black and white, and that something has to happen to obscure that fact.

That something is usually passion, but in this instance it was the deliberate excitation of passion through a certain kind of music for both financial and political reasons. During the 50-year period following World War II, mass audiences at first came to tolerate sexual deviance as part of the lifestyle of black musicians and then they came to expect it of the musicians, both black and white, who played that kind of music.

In *Cadillac Records*, Leonard Chess is portrayed as profane but morally upright and faithful to his wife when faced with the same temptations to which Muddy Waters succumbed. Nadine Cohodas, in spite of her attempt to make the Chess brothers respectable, tells a slightly different story when she informs us that Leonard's "other life ... occasionally ... came to light in one special circumstance or another."<sup>[4]</sup> When a black motorcycle gang showed up unannounced at Leonard's hospital bed, Leonard's son Marshall suddenly realized that his father lived something akin to the double life that Muddy Waters sang about, even if there were no illegitimate children to show for it.

Most Americans would find it difficult to believe that a Jew could corrupt the morals of a Negro because most Americans feel that the Negro never had any sexual morals to begin with. The situation in Chicago, however, comes into clearer focus when Cohodas writes about Leonard's dealings with white boys like Bobby Charles Guidry (who later renamed himself Bobby Charles), the Louisiana teenager who wrote "See You Later, Alligator." In fact, Chess's dealings with Guidry throw a new and largely unflattering light on the

morally corrupting effect Chess had on all of his protégés. "Leonard," according to Cohodas, "told Charles in their first meeting that Chess would make him rich and famous and he could have all the women he wanted, though Leonard had expressed the latter sentiment in far cruder terms than the 17-year-old was used to."<sup>[5]</sup> *Cadillac Records* doesn't dwell on the point, but it seems that Chuck Berry isn't the only one at Chess Records who should have been arrested for transporting minors across state lines for immoral purposes. Instead of being the direct beneficiary (sexually, at least), Leonard Chess was the pimp.

If feminism has done anything, it has taught women to brag about their moral degradation as the badge of liberation. The situation at Chess Records, feminism notwithstanding, throws the issue of moral corruption into even starker relief than the story of Bobby Charles. Linda Ellerbee, who worked for Chess as one of the nation's first female disc jockeys, concedes that she was financially exploited by Chess, but her feminism obscures the deeper type of exploitation that was going on when Chess procured abortions for female employees. After appealing to Leonard Chess, Linda Ellerbee received \$600 to pay for an abortion. Ellerbee left Chess's office "feeling ashamed and in tears, but she reminded herself that he had provided the money without hesitation and he didn't fire her."<sup>[6]</sup>

Leonard Chess knew that the music he was promoting was corrupting the morals of the Blacks whose interests he claimed to be serving. Chess, according to Cohodas,

said he was sure that all blacks listened to R & B "although not all will admit it. He likes jazz with the windows open but blues when the windows are closed. "I'm a Jew, but I don't like some of the music my father listened to," he went on. "It's the same with the Negro. ... We want a Top 40 format with Negro music, not the Uncle Tom ... Stepin Fetchit."<sup>[7]</sup>

Negro music, in other words, was synonymous with sexual degeneracy, and the Jewish record producer who cheated his talent out of their royalties and the Jewish disc jockey who got paid off by the Jewish record producer could, like the Jewish pimp, salve his conscience by claiming that he was only supplying the public with what it wanted.

In spite of Henry Ford's warnings during the 1920s, Americans were still largely clueless in understanding Jewish cultural subversion and the moral

subversion that was its necessary companion. The Poles, on the other hand, had had centuries of experience in dealing with this sort of thing. In 1936, eight years after the Czyz family had left Poland for the New World, Augustine Cardinal Hlond, the Primate of Poland, issued a pastoral letter on morals in which he claimed that Polish Jews were responsible for the moral corruption of the Polish nation. "So long as Jews remain Jews," Hlond wrote, "a Jewish problem exists and will continue to exist. This question varies in intensity and degree from country to country. It is especially difficult in our country and ought to be the object of serious consideration." After promising to "touch briefly here on its moral aspects in connection with the situation today," Hlond mentioned specifically Jewish involvement in pornography and prostitution as a danger to the morals of the Christian majority of Poland:

It is a fact that Jews are waging war against the Catholic Church, that they are steeped in free-thinking, and constitute the vanguard of atheism, the Bolshevik movement, and revolutionary activity. It is a fact that Jews have a corruptive influence on morals and that their publishing houses are spreading pornography. It is true that Jews are perpetrating fraud, practicing usury, and dealing in prostitution.<sup>[8]</sup>

He also mentioned Polish youth as particularly vulnerable. "It is true that, from a religious and ethical point of view, Jewish youth are having a negative influence on the Catholic youth in our schools."

"But," he continued, "let us be fair. Not all Jews are this way. There are very many Jews who are believers, honest, just, kind, and philanthropic. There is a healthy, edifying sense of family in very many Jewish homes. We know Jews who are ethically outstanding, noble, and upright."<sup>[9]</sup>

Hlond endorsed boycotts of Jewish businesses, but he warned Poles against adopting "that moral stance, imported from abroad," *i.e.*, from Nazi Germany, "that is basically and ruthlessly anti-Jewish" because

It is contrary to Catholic ethics. One may love one's own nation more, but one may not hate anyone. Not even Jews. It is good to prefer your own kind when shopping, to avoid Jewish stores and Jewish stalls in the marketplace, but it is forbidden to demolish a Jewish store, damage their merchandise, break windows, or throw things at their homes. One should stay away from the harmful moral influence of Jews, keep away from their anti-Christian culture, and especially boycott the Jewish press and demoralizing Jewish publications. But it is forbidden to

assault, beat up, maim, or slander Jews. One should honor and love Jews as human beings and neighbors, even though we do not honor the indescribable tragedy of that nation, which was the guardian of the idea of the Messiah and from which was born the Savior. When divine mercy enlightens a Jew to sincerely accept his and our Messiah, let us greet him into our Christian ranks with joy."[\[10\]](#)

Cardinal Hlond's warning hearkens back not to the 19th century racial concerns which fueled Hitler's rise to power in Germany but to the 6th and 7th century theological concerns of Pope Gregory the Great, who was the first pope to articulate what came to be known as "*Sicut Iudeis non*" the traditional teaching of the Church on the Jews. It also gives much needed cross-cultural perspective on what was essentially a Polish problem transported to America, namely, Jewish involvement in prostitution and pornography.

Ever since the release of iconic Blaxploitation films like *Superfly* and *The Mack* in the 1970s, the pimp has been a black figure in the public mind in America, one associated with the outlandish clothing and cars (in particular, the Cadillac El Dorado), as parodied in satiric films like *Undercover Brother*. This cultural phenomenon obscures the fact that during the 1920s and 1930s in both Poland and America, prostitution was a Jewish business. Jews not blacks were responsible for "White Slavery."

"Between 1880 and 1939," Edward Bristow writes, "the Jews played a conspicuous role in 'white slavery,' as the commercial prostitution of that era was dramatically called. Not only was this Jewish participation conspicuous, it was historically unprecedented, geographically widespread, and fraught with collective political dangers. "Jewish trafficking," Bristow continues, "was anchored in brothel keeping," women freelanced or kept houses while their husbands procured ... Jewish traffickers also supplied Gentile-run houses."[\[11\]](#) The Jews learned their trade in Eastern and Central Europe, where they, again according to Bristow, "dominated the international traffic out of the area."[\[12\]](#)

Jewish involvement in prostitution is a situation which continues to the present day, in spite of media efforts to obscure it. The high-class prostitution operation which ensnared Elliott Spitzer when he was governor of New York was run by a Jewish pimp, similar to the ones which Bristow described. With the fall of communism and the collapse of the economies of the former Soviet bloc countries, many eastern European women ended up in brothels in Israel

run by the descendants of the pimps who ran the white slavery trade in the Pale of the Settlement during the first half of the 20th century.

On January 11, 1998, the *New York Times* ran an article on Slavic Gentile prostitutes trapped in Israel. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the resulting economic chaos, hundreds of thousands of Russian and Ukrainian women have been dispersed throughout the world, most entrapped in an international prostitution trade run by the "Russian mafia," a significant part of which is Jewish. According to an article by Leonard Fine in a 1998 Jewish Bulletin, "Israel has become a routine destination for the global trafficking of women," and "The turnover of the prostitution trade in Israel comes to some \$450 million a year."<sup>[13]</sup>

The sex trade in Israel began in the Pale of the Settlement. By 1889 Jewish women ran 203 of 289 (70 percent) of the licensed brothels in the "Pale of Settlement" (encompassing over 20 provinces in eastern Poland and western Russia — an area where Jews were about 12 percent of the population). Of the 5127 licensed prostitutes in this area 1122 or (22 percent) were Jewish. Bristow claims that, "The grievous political dangers for local Jewry in the context of enduring interethnic hostilities, when 78 percent of the rest of the women were Gentile, many indentured in Jewish houses, is obvious."<sup>[14]</sup> In Minsk, Jews ran all four legitimate houses of ill repute. In the Russian province of Kherson (which includes the city of Odessa) 30 of 36 licensed brothels were Jewish-owned. The American Consul in Odessa wrote in 1908 that the "whole 'business' of prostitution is almost exclusively in the hands of the Jews."<sup>[15]</sup>

In Vienna, authorities knew of about 50 Jewish prostitution traffickers based in Czernowitz, "and they were a very inbred lot extending over two generations." The most publicized 'white slavery' trial occurred in 1892, in Lemberg (once also called Lvov, then a Polish provincial capital, today called Lviv in Ukraine), where 27 traffickers — all Jews were prosecuted for ensnaring women to go to Constantinople, Egypt, and India. Some of the women recruits understood their tasks, but others "were maids, others fieldworkers, one a butcher's helper, all apparently promised honest jobs." (Lemberg, "a cradle of Zionism from the 1880s onward," also had anti-Jewish riots in 1918.)<sup>[16]</sup>

By the 1930s, Jewish-run prostitution had spread from the Pale of the Settlement to England. According to Martin Fido,



Jewish dominance of the East End [of London] and its crime was reflected in their Yiddish name, "spielers" (places for games). In the Brick Lane neighborhood, Isaac Bogard, a Jewish villain whose swarthy complexion and tightly curled black hair earned him the nickname "Darky the Coon," extended his interests. He began in the early years of the 20th century by supplying muscle for street traders who wanted to prevent newcomers from moving in, but he moved on to managing prostitutes and drinking clubs."<sup>[17]</sup>

Jewish involvement in white slavery (especially when it involved Jewish pimps prostituting gentile women) led to a rise in anti-Semitism in the turbulent period following World War I. Adolf Hitler was infuriated that many non-Jewish women were lured into what was largely a Jewish-run operation in Vienna. Hitler wrote in *Mein Kampf*:

In no other city of Western Europe could the relationship between Jewry and prostitution, and even now the white slave traffic, be studied better than in Vienna ... an icy shudder ran down my spine when seeing for the first time the Jew as an evil, shameless, and calculating manager of this shocking vice, the outcome of the scum of the big city.<sup>[18]</sup>

During the last half of the 19th century, Jewish pimps from the Pale of the Settlement expanded their prostitution network to include the New World.

Thirty-nine Jews were expelled from Brazil in 1879 for soliciting women for prostitution and running illegal whorehouses. [BRISTOW, p. 114] Of 199 licensed whorehouses in Buenos Aires in 1909, 102 were run by Jews and more than half the prostitutes were Jewish. [FRIED, p. 71] 4,248 Jewish women were registered for licensed brothels in Buenos Aires between 1880-1913, and those represented only the licensed ones. Edward Bristow estimates that 9,000 Jewish women immigrants came to Brazil in a 25-year span in that era as prostitutes (many were no doubt highly transient), when the total Jewish population of Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay combined amounted to less than 60,000 people in 1910. [BRISTOW, p. 119] In 1889, the Buenos Aires Bulletin Continental reported that 200 German/Austrian women were held against their will by Jewish pimps from Poland. [GUY, p. 5] "Jewish procurers," says Donna Guy, "... became an organized ring in major cities all over the world. They were particularly powerful in the Argentine port cities of Buenos Aires and Rosario ... [GUY, p. 10] ... Turn-of-the-century

reports by the Hamburg B'nai Kith [a Jewish fraternal organization] concluded that most prostitutes in Buenos Aires were Jewish and that traffickers 'dress with ostentatious elegance, wear large diamonds, go to the theatre or opera daily; they have their own clubs and organizations where wares are sorted, auctioned, and sold. They have their own secret wireless code, are well organized, and — heavens! — in South America everything is possible.'" [GUY, p. 19]<sup>[19]</sup>

After the war, "Jews," according to an account by Marvin Wolf, a Jewish captain in the US Army serving in Germany, "recruited starving, desperate German girls and opened brothels." According to Rabbi Dave, the Jewish chaplain in Frankfurt am Main, the Jewish pimps "Got their revenge [on the German people], and got rich, too," something he found morally repugnant: "They're in other businesses now, but do you really want to spend Pesach [Passover] with such people?"<sup>[20]</sup>

The same thing held true for North America. Jewish immigration meant a sharp rise in prostitution in cities like New York.

In 1909 one Jewish observer, Marcus Braun, estimated there to be 50,000 Jewish immigrant prostitutes in America and 10,000 pimps. (Edward Bristow considers these figures grossly inflated, but notes that one of Braun's colleagues, echoing at least public feelings about the problem, thought there were up to 100,000 American Jewish women of ill repute.) In any case, the Jewish pimps of New York City (who owned many of the "so-called French" bordellos in the Tenderloin district and "sought to fill them with French prostitutes from abroad") [BRISTOL, p. 165] had their own official organization: "The New York Independent Benevolent Association." Frances Kellar, a respected social worker, wrote in 1907 that "the two nationalities who may be said to be central to the disorderly house business in New York [are] French and Jewish ... French houses ... are not ... to be so much feared as the Jewish ... [which are] thoroughly vicious and bad." [BRISTOL, p. 165] By the turn of the century, "hundreds and hundreds" of Jewish women walked the Lower East Side of New York City as prostitutes. [FRIED, p. 8] Benjamin Altman described the whores he saw on Allen Street: "A hundred women on every ... corner. Tall women, short women. Fair women. Ugly women." [FRIED, p. 12]<sup>[21]</sup>

Before long, the American public was beginning to note the high Jewish



representation in the prostitution trade. In the June 1909 issue of *McClure's* magazine, for instance, George Kibbe Turner wrote that "the appearance of the Jewish dealer in women" was "a product of New York politics." The Jewish pimp "has vitiated more than any other single agency the moral life of the great cities of America in the past ten years."<sup>[22]</sup>

"It is an absolute fact," wrote Ernest Bell in his 1911 book about white slavery, "that corrupt Jews are now the backbone of the loathsome traffic in New York and Chicago. The good Jews know this and feel keenly the unspeakable shame of it."<sup>[23]</sup> "The criminal instincts that are so often found naturally in the Russian and Polish Jew," wrote Frank Moss in a popular volume called *American Metropolis* (1897), "come to the surface in such ways as to warrant the opinion that these people are the worst element in the entire make-up of New York City ... A large proportion of the people of New Israel are addicted to vice."<sup>[24]</sup>

The situation in Chicago was just as bad as the situation in New York. Prostitution was an essentially Jewish business in both cities.

By 1907 Rabbi Emil Hirsch declared that 75 percent of the "white slavery" in his city was controlled by Jews. [BRISTOW, p. 177] The Jewish periodical, the *Forward*, forlornly reported that "the facts that were uncovered at the trial [for corruption] of [police] inspector McCann are horrifying. 75 percent of the white slave trade in Chicago is in Jewish hands. The owners of most of the immoral resorts on the West Side are Jews. Even in Gentile neighborhoods Jews stand out prominently in the nefarious business." [FRIED, p. 70]<sup>[25]</sup>

Then as now, there was a connection between the music business and prostitution. In his autobiography, Jewish singer Eddie Fisher wrote that "while performing in England in the late 1950s I had become friendly with a Jewish song plugger, a man who eventually left the music business to open a very exclusive whorehouse."<sup>[26]</sup>

When Marshall Chess went to work for his father, he felt a sense of frustration at the unspecific nature of his new job. At first it seemed that his job was just to drive around with his father. Later Marshall learned that his job was to observe his father and then imitate his behavior. That meant bribing disk jockeys with cash and other perks. According to Cohodas, it meant being a pimp but not a drug dealer. "You might even get somebody a girl, if you have to," Marshall Chess told Nadine Cohodas, who was quick to

add that Chess *files*, "never paid anybody cash and never bought them drugs."<sup>[27]</sup>

In 1948 Muddy Waters began a short but intense set of gigs at the Macomba Lounge. *Cadillac Records* portrays them as one long brawl interrupted by a few musical interludes. Then, in 1950, the Macomba Lounge burned down. Cohodas calls the timing of the fire "fortuitous" but claims that "an insurance investigation turned up nothing untoward."<sup>[28]</sup> The black term for the "fortuitous" combustion of Semitic property in the black ghettos of large cities like Chicago and Philadelphia is "Jewish Lightning." Whatever its cause, after the fire, the Chess brothers were "happy with a cash settlement that netted them as much, if not more, than they could have gotten from a sale."<sup>[29]</sup> It was this insurance settlement that launched them into the record business.

By the time the Chess family arrived in Chicago in 1928 as poor immigrants from Poland, popular music in America was already in Jewish hands. Commenting on a Federal Sherman anti-trust suit filed against Irving Berlin, Leo Feist and the officers of seven New York music publishing corporations, Henry Ford claimed that "Popular Music is a Jewish monopoly. Jazz is a Jewish creation. The mush, the slush, the sly suggestion, the abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes, are of Jewish origin."<sup>[30]</sup> The defendants, Ford claimed, "controlled 80 percent of the available copyrighted songs used by manufacturers of phonographs, player piano rolls and other musical reproducing instruments, and fixed prices at which the records or rolls were to be sold to the public."<sup>[31]</sup> The other 20 percent were controlled by other Jewish music houses not included in that special group.

Jewish control of popular music through what would come to be known as the music industry began with the efforts of "song pluggers," largely vaudeville entertainers at the time, who would popularize by repeated renditions on the stage, until the flabby mind of the "ten-twenty-thirt" audiences began to repeat it on the streets. These "song pluggers" were "the paid agents of the Yiddish song agencies. Money, and not merit, ... dominates the spread of the moron music which is styled 'Jewish Jazz.'"<sup>[32]</sup>

## Jewish Jazz

Tin Pan Alley, the section of 28th St. in New York between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, the heart of the American music industry when Ford published his critique of the "'Abies' and 'Izzies' and 'Moes' who make up the composing staffs of the various ... Yiddish song manufacturers" had more than a little in common with the Jewish pimps who came over with them during the great wave of Jewish immigration because

Flocks of young girls who thought they could sing, and others, who thought they could write song poems, came to the neighborhood allured by dishonest advertisements that promised more than the budding Yiddish exploiters were able to fulfill. Needless to say, scandal became rampant, as it always does where so-called "Gentile" girls are reduced to the necessity of seeking favors from the eastern type of Jew.<sup>[33]</sup>

If Tin Pan Alley was another word for the music business in American, then that business was a version of the black-Jewish alliance from the moment of its inception. By the mid-'20s, when the book that would eventually become known as *The International Jew* began appearing in the *Dearborn Independent*, Ford noted "the organized eagerness of the Jew to make an alliance with the Negro." He also noted "that it was Jewish 'jazz' that rode in upon the wave of Negro 'ragtime' popularity, and eventually displaced the 'ragtime,'" which Ford considered a legitimate development of black music.

One of the earliest Jewish promoters of Negro music was Isadore Baline, otherwise known as Irving Berlin, one of the "Izzies" of Tin Pan Alley who became "wealthy through their success in pandering to a public taste which they first debased."<sup>[34]</sup> Berlin was born in Russia, but after he arrived in New York he became the author of "Vamp" songs and a master of "unashamed erotic suggestion." Irving Berlin, according to Ford, was only following in the footsteps of,

The first self-styled "King of Jazz" ... a Jew named "Frisco." The general directors of the whole downward trend have been Jews. It needed just their touch of cleverness to camouflage the moral filth and

raise it half a degree above that natural stage where it begets nothing but disgust. They cannot gild the lily, but they can veil the skunk-cabbage, and that is exactly what has been done. The modern popular song is a whited sepulcher, sparkling without, but within full of the dead bones of all the old disgusting indecencies."[\[35\]](#)

The Jews, according to Ford, used Jazz to corrupt the morals of the majority.

It is of little use blaming the people. The people are what they are made. Give the liquor business full sway and you have a population that drinks and carouses. After preaching abstinence to the victims for a century, the country turned its attention to the victimizers and the abuse was greatly curtailed. The traffic is still illicitly carried on, but even so, the best way to abolish the illicit traffic is to identify the groups that carry it on. The entire population of the United States could be turned into narcotic addicts if the same freedom was given the illicit narcotic ring as is now given the Yiddish popular song manufacturers. But in such a condition it would be stupid to attack the addicts; common sense would urge the exposure of the panderers.[\[36\]](#)

The popular song is an especially good vehicle for moral corruption because "by sheer dint of repetition and suggestion the song catches on — as a burr thistle catches on."[\[37\]](#)

The principle is expressed in the words of the song, "Everybody's Doin' It." You go to the theater and hear a song. Next day at lunch the café singer is singing the same song. Blaring phonographs used for advertising purposes blat out the same song at you as you pass on the street. You walk past an afternoon band concert in the park the band is playing the same song. If you are a normal person you have a feeling that perhaps something has been going on in the world while you were engaged with your own affairs. The song - you say to yourself frankly - is silly and the music trivial; but you keep your opinion a secret, because, after all, "everybody's singin' it." Not long after you find yourself humming it. You go home, and your daughter is "practicing up" on the piece. It yells its way through your home and through your neighborhood and through your city and through your state until in sheer disgust, and in one day, the people pitch it bodily out-of-doors. But,

behold, another song is waiting to take its place - a song fresh from Yiddish Tin Pan Alley. And the agony is repeated. This occurs from 30 to 50 times a year.<sup>[38]</sup>

The song melody was especially corrupting when it was linked to indecent lyrics of the sort that got sold under the counter and could be substituted for the over the counter version when the situation demanded. As anyone who has been unable to drive an advertising jingle out of his mind knows, music enters the soul directly and can be used to carry morally corrupting thoughts with it: "The chances are that the song you are humming today is being hummed by you simply because you have perforce heard it so often that it beats unconsciously within your brain."<sup>[39]</sup> The process, as Ford pointed out, was largely involuntary. Those thoughts can also be attached to musically degenerated forms, as Plato and the ancients warned. One of the characteristics which both the music Plato condemned and the Negro Jazz shared was syncopation, an element which race music would share with the Jazz of the 1920s and the white imitators of rock 'n roll in the 1960s. "Seductive syncopation [had already] captured the public ear" by the time Ford wrote his book.

From moral corruption it was a short step to revolution. Ford mentioned Hollywood films as a rehearsal for revolution, but claimed that popular music was an even more effective "way of making 'revolution' as common and as familiar a thought as the movies and popular songs have made 'vamps' and 'harems' and 'hooch' and 'Hula Hula.'"<sup>[40]</sup>

The moral decline of the 1920s, according to Ford, can be traced to Jewish influence over American culture. Popular music was revolutionary. Jews controlled the industry from top to bottom:

the Jewish control of the popular song field means that all non-Jews are barred out. It would be next to impossible for the song of a non-Jew, however meritorious, to reach the public by the usual channels. The musical magazines, the musical critics, the musical managers, the music publishers, the music-hall owners, the majority of the performers are not only all Jews, but are Jews consciously banded together to keep out all others.<sup>[41]</sup>

What was true of Jazz, promoted through vaudeville and sheet music in the 1920s, was *a fortiori* true of race music, rhythm and blues and rock 'n roll in the 1950s.

The Record Business in the 1950s was a Jewish operation. "Yiddish," Cohodas notes citing an industry insider, "was the second language of the record business."[\[42\]](#)

## Payola

By the 1950s what Henry Ford had called "song plugging" in the 1920s was referred to as "payola." Most of the payoffs were informal, via things like the "\$100 handshake," but oftentimes payola was more blatant than that:

WKHM in Detroit offered an "Album of the Week" deal: for \$350 the station would play a record 114 times a week with a commercial before and after each play for a minimum of six weeks. Another record company executive told *Time* magazine that under a formula he figured out, it took \$22,000 to make a song popular in Chicago. "There are so many people to shmeer," he said, creating a synonym for bribe from a Yiddish word that meant "to spread." "The singer, his manager, the station, the disc jockey."[\[43\]](#)

*Cadillac Records* portrays the disc jockeys who took payola as a bunch of venal, cigarette-smoking rednecks, when in fact the main beneficiaries were Jews like Alan Freed, the Jewish disc jockey who invented the term "rock 'n roll." By the late '50s, the use of payola had become so widespread and so flagrant, that the government decided to intervene. On November 21, 1959, Alan Freed was fired from his job at WABC in New York. Freed was one of the biggest recipients of payola; he was also one of the biggest promoters of Chess Records. In a letter he wrote to the board of the American Broadcasting Company, the owners of WABC, Freed defended himself by claiming that he had "and shall continue to program records for my show solely and completely on the basis of my evaluation of the records and their appeal to my listening audience."[\[44\]](#)

Cohodas gives some indication of how that evaluation process worked. "You mother f\*\*\*er," Leonard Chess said to Freed after he showed up at WABC in New York and found that Freed wasn't playing Chess records on his show.

"What the hell are you playing that guy's record for when I pay you money every week: You know I pay the mortgage up in god-d\*\*\*ed Connecticut. ..." When Freed replied that he hadn't gotten anything that week, Leonard was furious. Nonetheless, he walked over to Freed, took



a wad of bills out of his pocket, peeled off a few and handed them to the disc jockey along with a stack of new 45s. "Friends," Freed said when he was back on the air, "I've just been visited by my friends from Chicago, Leonard and Phil Chess, and in honor of their presence, this is Chess Records night."<sup>[45]</sup>

Payola eventually destroyed the career of Alan Freed. Even though he was fined only \$500 and sentenced to a six-month suspended jail term, he never regained the audience he had at WABC and died in 1965 "a broken man physically and financially."<sup>[46]</sup>

Payola meant that Jewish disc jockeys got paid for the songs the black musicians wrote. Freed got 50 percent of the royalties for "Sincerely," but the most famous example of Jews ripping off of black talent was Chuck Berry's hit "Maybelline." "Maybelline" was a "crossover" hit, which is to say, it was race music, with all of the moral corruption that genre implied, intended for a white audience. Because it reached a much wider audience, via payola, at places like *Bandstand*, Dick Clark's Philadelphia-based show for white teenagers, Berry stood to earn a lot more money in royalties than Muddy Waters did from his Chicago-based race music.

But when the sheet music for "Maybelline" rolled off the presses in 1955, Berry learned that he was sharing his royalties with two other men, neither of whom had anything to do with writing either the song's melody or its lyrics. One of the "co-authors" of "Maybelline" was Russ Fratto, who turned out to be the landlord of the building where Chess Records was housed. The other co-author of "Maybelline" was none other than Alan Freed.

Marshall Chess claimed that payola was part of the cost of doing business. "It wasn't a matter of right or wrong," he told Cohodas. "It was a matter of survival."<sup>[47]</sup> Marshall Chess's essentially Talmudic view of payola was one not shared by the former sharecroppers. In fact, it "opened the brothers up to severe criticism and later litigation."<sup>[48]</sup>

Leonard Chess's way of dealing with the royalty issue was to make Muddy Waters feel "n\*\*\*er rich." This usually meant peeling off a C-note from the wad of bills Leonard carried around in his pocket and handing it to Muddy Waters whenever the blues singer was broke. But there were other methods. When "Hoochie Coochie Man" made the charts in 1954, Chess bought Muddy Waters a brand new red and white Oldsmobile 98.<sup>[49]</sup> The undisputed emblem of being n\*\*\*er rich, however, was the Cadillac, an icon



which found its way into the title of the film on Chess Records. In spite of bending over backwards to see some justification for Chess's behavior, Cohodas finds his way of doing business "uncomfortably close to sharecropping" with the label functioning as "the company store," and the musician as the "employee/sharecropper."<sup>[50]</sup>

A close second to the Cadillac, as the Chicago version of the company store, was "taking care of musicians' other needs," as when "Leonard made available his personal lawyer, Nate Notkin, to handle Waters's paternity suits." Water's legal fees were deducted from his royalties according to a schedule that Waters never saw. Bo Diddley, another black musician from the South who recorded for Chess Records, had similar complaints. "Bo Diddley ain't got sh\*t," he told *Rolling Stone* magazine in 1987. "My records are sold all over the world, and I ain't got a f\*\*\*ing dime. ... When I left Chess Records ... they said I owed them \$125,000."<sup>[51]</sup>

By the time the '70s rolled around, the grumbling had morphed into lawsuits. In 1974 Howlin' Wolf filed a lawsuit against Arc Music, the music publishing company the Chess brothers owned with Benny Goodman and his brother, asking for \$2.5 million in damages for unpaid royalties on his songs. The two sides reached an undisclosed monetary settlement after Wolf's death in 1976. In 1976 Muddy Waters and Willie Dixon "filed identical lawsuits against the publishing company, alleging fraud and conspiracy and asking to be paid money damages and to have their publishing contracts voided."<sup>[52]</sup>

Cohodas does her best to view the accounting practices at Chess Records in a positive light: "The musicians believed they deserved more than they got. Leonard and Phil believed they treated them fairly. They played by the rules of the time."<sup>[53]</sup> Her efforts are undermined by the fact that the accounting practices at Chess Records all took place in the head of Phil Chess. There are no surviving written accounts because there were never any written accounts. The accounts, if we can call the evanescent figures in Phil Chess's mind by that name, disappeared when Phil Chess died. Even in trying to defend the Chess brothers' accounting procedures, Cohodas is forced to concede that, "The relationships could be paternalistic, even condescending. At Chess it sometimes looks as though Leonard and Phil gave their musicians an allowance rather than a salary."<sup>[54]</sup> Paternalism filled in where accounting left off. Phil Chess, Leonard's brother, claims that they treated their Negro singers "like they were your children," because that is how "they wanted to be" treated, at least in his mind. "They used to come to you whenever they had a

problem," Phil Chess continued, "If one had his wife having a baby in one hospital and his old lady in another, they come to you to pay the bills so his old lady wouldn't know. ... As time went by, it was 'You know this wasn't right, that wasn't right,' which I'm not gonna dispute. I'm not gonna defend. I know in my mind what it was and that's it."<sup>[55]</sup>

Whether it was paternalism or sexual liberation as a form of control, the charge that the Chess brothers cheated the Mississippians dogged their business from its inception and contributed to the animosity which eventually led to the collapse of the black-Jewish alliance in the late '60s. Cohodas claims that the "stereotype of the crafty, even rapacious Jew played into the disputes that arose later over royalties and contracts: Jews were about money, smart but not to be trusted."<sup>[56]</sup>

Harold Cruse, the man whose book, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual*, did more to bring about the demise of that alliance than any other work, gives some evidence that the black attitude toward Jews as "rapacious" was based on something more than stereotypes. Cruse, it should be remembered, was struggling to get his musical plays produced on Broadway during the same period that Muddy Waters and Chuck Berry were being cheated out of their royalties by the Chess Brothers. Cruse felt that the Negro had been cheated out of his musical patrimony largely because of his own unfortunate experiences in dealing with Jewish music producers in New York. America has never "produced a black Gershwin," according to Cruse, because Jewish "publishers have used and exploited the Negro composer unmercifully. This pattern has continued up to the present."<sup>[57]</sup> Duke Ellington was denied a Pulitzer Prize in 1965, because, according to Cruse, "the Gershwin-type musicians achieved status and recognition in the 1920s for music that they literally stole outright from Harlem nightclubs. ... The role of the Negro, as entertainer, has not changed since the 1920s. In 1967, the Negro entertainer is still being used, manipulated, and exploited by whites (predominantly Jewish whites)."<sup>[58]</sup>

The talk about royalties obscures the role Jews played in the moral corruption of the culture in general and of their musicians in particular. Jews inherited the term "race music," but they soon started fiddling with the terminology and the music as a way of making it more appealing to white audiences. Jerry Wexler, head of Atlantic Records, changed the term "race music" into "rhythm and blues," and Alan Freed, the Jewish disc jockey who was one of the biggest casualties of the payola scandal, did him one better by

changing "rhythm and blues" into "rock 'n' roll."

Muddy Waters was never anything but a blues singer with a limited, racially defined constituency on the South Side of Chicago. His successor at Chess Records, the man who made race music acceptable to white teenagers, was Chuck Berry. As one indication of his crossover appeal, Chuck Berry appeared on Dick Clark's Philadelphia-based TV show for white teenagers, *American Bandstand*. As another indication, Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun, the men who ran Atlantic Records, "observed that the rhythm and blues sound was changing to a more pop feel in response to the growing potential of the white teenage market."<sup>[59]</sup>

On October 28, 1961 Chuck Berry lost his last appeal in a conviction for transporting a minor across state lines for immoral purposes and went to prison. Cohodas claims that "Leonard and Phil had been very concerned about Berry's troubles,"<sup>[60]</sup> but she goes on to add that "Berry had no such memory in his rendition of events in his autobiography." Cohodas goes out of her way to explain that the 14-year-old girl whom Chuck Berry brought to St. Louis for immoral purposes was an Apache Indian, which is to say, that she was not white. *Cadillac Records*, however, dwells on Berry's sexual exploits with white girls. In case the point of Berry's sexual adventures with white girls in the back seat of his Cadillac might be lost on an audience that has come to expect this sort of behavior from its musical idols, *Cadillac Records* deals with the political implications of Berry's music as well. At the beginning of one concert, the black and white teenagers are separated by red velvet ropes. Once Berry's music kicks in, however, Dionysian frenzy ensues, and the rope barriers are overwhelmed by one large mass of interracial gyrating teenagers, some of whom come up on stage, to the consternation of the police, and start gyrating with Chuck Berry.

The point of the Berry concert vignette in *Cadillac Records* is to show how race music fostered integration and the overturning of an unjust social order, but it also indicates that the music itself had a morally corrupting influence on the teenagers, both black and white, who listened to it. Race music began as a chronicle of the moral degradation which followed the black migration from Mississippi to Chicago. It then morphed into a vehicle for the moral corruption of white teenagers. If Chuck Berry was known as a purveyor of "black hillbilly" music, Elvis Presley was the mirror image of the same thing, a white guy who sang like a Negro. Elvis became a household word in 1957, and it was in that same year that Norman Mailer's essay "The

"White Negro" appeared in the *Partisan Review*. Even though Mailer was talking about jazz and Beatniks, no one fit the white Negro bill better than Elvis. Sam Philips, the man who was to Elvis and Sun Records what Leonard Chess was to Chuck Berry and Chess Records, got the idea of musical miscegenation that Berry and Chess were promoting and put it into practice from the perspective of a white southerner who was as avid to make money off of teenagers as the Jews in Chicago were. "White Youngsters," he claimed "weren't sure whether they ought to like it [race music] or not" when black musicians performed the music. As a result, Philips "got thinking how many records you could sell if you could find white performers who could play and sing in this same exciting, alive way." Cohodas claims that "Disc jockey Alan Freed believed the same thing, only he was cultivating a white market for the black performers who made the music he loved as much as Philips did."<sup>[61]</sup> She also deals with the sexually subversive nature of Berry's music by ascribing the very idea to southern racists. Cohodas, however, concedes the point white southerners were trying to make on more than one occasion. Berry, she tells us,

would have violated every racial-sexual taboo. Berry himself appreciated the racial-sexual borders, if for no other reason than his occasional scrapes with southern sheriffs angry and unsettled by his popularity among southern white women only too happy to share his company. Sam Phillips had also understood, and perhaps in their own way Leonard and Phil had too.<sup>[62]</sup>

The point of all of this music, in other words, was to violate "racial-sexual borders." At a Bo Diddley concert in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, one of the sidemen jumped off the stage only to find himself surrounded by white women eager to violate these racial-sexual taboos. Sensing that "racial decorum had been violated," and that moral subversion was a prelude to revolution, the police, "all of them white," shut down the performance. When Marshall Chess asked what was going on, he was called a "Jew N\*\*\*er Lover," and told "We're going to lock you up and it will take them weeks to find you."

By the time the Revolution arrived in Chicago, Leonard Chess discovered that he was one of its first victims. By the late 1960s, the South Side of Chicago was a dangerous place for Polish immigrants. Chess was beaten by black assailants more than once. *Cadillac Records* portrays Leonard's beating

as politically motivated. Cohodas finds this inexplicable because Chess supported the NAACP, which she fails to see as a Jewish organization which had enraged militant blacks by the time the '60s rolled around by its duplicitous promotion of integration for blacks and ethnic solidarity for Jews.

The revolution always devours its own Jews, and the sexual revolution of the '60s, with its Negro sound track, was no exception to this rule. The Chess Brothers had fomented a revolution that was going to swallow them among its first victims. Sensing that their time had passed, Leonard Chess decided to sell out:

He told Marshall that it was getting more and more difficult for white people to own a company geared to black consumers. Jesse Jackson was pressuring Chess, just as he was pressuring other companies that did business in the black community, to hire blacks in senior positions.<sup>[63]</sup>

Corruption was a two-way street. Marshall Chess, Leonard's son, recalled being shocked when he learned that Willie Dixon had "two wives and two families."<sup>[64]</sup> "I don't feel it's no disgrace for a man because it's forty cows to one bull."<sup>[65]</sup> The record business may have been good to Leonard and Phil, but it was not good for the next generation of the Chess family. As a result of his involvement in the record business his father had founded, Marshall Chess ended up a drug addict. His sister Susie died of a drug overdose in 1973, and his only other sibling died in 1976 from complications following surgery.

Leonard Chess died of a fatal heart attack on October 16, 1969. Two months later, as some indication of how things had changed, Chicago police stormed Black Panther headquarters and killed Fred Hampton.

## Biographical Note

E. Michael Jones, editor of [Culture Wars](#) magazine, is the author of more than fifteen books, several of which are available for Kindle, including:

[Jewish Nazis](#)

[Requiem for a Whale Rider](#)

[L'affaire Williamson: The Catholic Church and Holocaust Denial](#)

[Abu Ghraib and The American Empire](#)

[Travels with Harley in Search of America: Motorcycles, War, Deracination, Consumer Identity](#)

## Footnotes

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- [1] Nadine Cohodas, *Spinning Blues into Gold: The Chess Brothers and the Legendary Chess Records* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000).
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- [3] Cohodas, p. 29.
- [4] Cohodas, p. 111.
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- [8] Ronald Modras, *The Catholic Church and Antisemitism, Poland 1933-1939* (Chur: Harwood, 1994), pp. 343-347.
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- [43] Cohodas, p. 176.
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- [47] Cohodas, p. 174.
- [48] Cohodas, p. 119.
- [49] Cohodas, p. 93.
- [50] Cohodas, p. 94.
- [51] Cohodas, p. 309.
- [52] Ibid.
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- [58] Cruse, p. 108.
- [59] Cohodas, p. 100.
- [60] Cohodas, p. 207.
- [61] Cohodas, p. 145.
- [62] Cohodas, p. 148.
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[64] Cohodas, p. 83.

[65] Ibid.